

Remarks Announcing Measures To Address School Violence *April 30, 1999*

Ladies and gentlemen, in the last several days, like most Americans, I have spent an enormous amount of time following the events in Colorado, talking to family and friends and others. And I have some thoughts on that that I want to share with you today.

Let me begin by saying we got some more good news today on the economic front, with the word that our economy expanded by 4.5 percent in the first quarter of this year. This news provides both more evidence that we should stick with our economic strategy and also is a worthwhile reminder that for all the challenges we face at home and abroad, we are indeed a fortunate people. We are strong enough to meet those challenges.

Over the past 10 days our whole Nation has been united in grief with the people of Littleton, Colorado. We have also been profoundly moved by the courage, the common sense, and the fundamental goodness of Littleton students, teachers, parents, and public servants as they have spoken to us of the tragic events there. I have listened carefully to what they have said and to other young people and parents who have been on the townhall meetings and those whom I have met personally.

We should recognize the simple truth that there is no simple, single answer. We should not be fighting about who takes the blame. Instead, we should all be looking for ways to take responsibility, and we should be doing that together.

As we have united in grief, now we should unite in action. If we ask the right question, "What can we do to give your children safe, whole childhoods?" then there will be answers for parents and children, for teachers, communities, and for those who influence the lives and the environment in which our children live, including those of us in government, religious leaders, the entertainment and Internet communities, those who produce explosives and weapons, and those who use them lawfully.

I am inviting representatives of all these groups to come to the White House on May 10th for a strategy session on children, violence, and responsibility. The First Lady, the Vice President, and Mrs. Gore, all of whom have

worked for years to give our children the childhoods they deserve, will join me. I ask everyone to come to this meeting with ideas about how we can move forward together.

As Hillary said yesterday, we need nothing less than a grassroots effort to protect our children and turn them away from violence. If citizens, parents and children alike, working together in their communities, can reduce teen pregnancy, reduce drunk driving, make seatbelt use nearly universal, then working together, we can protect our children.

I want to briefly set out a framework for how this challenge can best be addressed. The push and pull of modern life adds incalculable new burdens to the work of parents. We must strive to find ways to bring parents and children together more, to get parents more involved with their children's lives, to get negative influences and guns out of the lives of our children, and to give families the tools to meet these challenges.

First, we must help parents to pass on their values to their children in the face of a blizzard of popular communications that too often undermine those values. For young people who are particularly vulnerable and isolated, the violent video games they play can seem more real than conversations at home or lessons at school. We've been working to give parents stronger tools to protect their children, and we must do more.

The V-chip will be included in half the new televisions sold this year. And together with the voluntary rating system adopted by broadcasters, it will give parents a new ability to screen the images their children see. Meanwhile, we've launched the most ambitious media plan ever to educate our children about the dangers of drugs.

The Vice President and Internet service providers have given parents the ability to block access to violent or otherwise inappropriate websites. The Vice President will continue to work with industry to find ways to help parents guide their children through cyberspace, and we'll have more to say on that in the days ahead.

We have worked to give our parents the tools to protect children from violence and to take

guns out of the hands of children. The policy of zero tolerance for guns in schools led to 6,000 expulsions or suspensions in the last year alone.

This week I proposed new measures to keep guns away from criminals and children; requiring background checks for buying guns at gun shows, as they are required at gun stores now, and background checks for the purchase of explosives; banning handgun ownership for people under 21; and restoring the Brady bill's cooling off period; and closing the loopholes in the assault weapons law.

Even on these contentious issues, I believe we can reach across party lines and find common ground. I hope that sportsmen, gun manufacturers, and lawmakers of all parties will see these steps for what they are, commonsense measures to promote the common good. We all love our children. I respect the rights of hunters and sportsmen. Let's bury the hatchet and build a future for our children together.

We must help parents fulfill their most important responsibilities. We all say we want parents to talk to their children more, but we all know that too many families have too little time even to have dinner together.

Because parents too often have too little time, we've passed the Family and Medical Leave Act, and we're working to expand it. Because too many children leave school at 3, with nowhere to go and no adult to talk to, we've giving a quarter-million kids access to after-school and summer school programs, and we're working to triple that number. Because many parents need help in recognizing the signs of illness in their children, we're working to expand access to mental health care for children of all ages. Next month, Mrs. Gore will host the first White House Conference on Mental Health. We are also working to expand counseling, mentoring, and mental health services in our schools.

Most important of all, and perhaps most difficult, parents must be more active participants in their children's lives. It is not for us to pass judgment on how those two young men in Colorado descended into darkness. We may never know what can be or even what could have

been done. But this should be a wake-up call for all parents. We can never take our children for granted. We must never let the lines of communication, no matter how frayed, be broken altogether. Our children need us, even if they don't know it sometimes.

This terrible tragedy must not be an occasion for silence. This weekend I ask all parents, if they have not already done so, to sit down and talk to their children about what happened at Littleton and what is happening in their schools and their lives.

If we are not careful, when our children move through their teen years and begin to create their own separate lives, the bustle and burden of our daily lives can cause families to drift too far apart, to ignore the still-strong needs of children for genuine concern and guidance and honest conversation. This is sometimes the hardest thing of all, but it is vital, and lives depend on it.

Finally, I ask students to do more to help each other. Next week, if you have not already done so, I ask every student in America to look for someone at school who is not in your group. You know, there have always been different crowds in schools, and there always will be. This, too, is an inevitable part of growing up and finding your own path through life. But it should not be an occasion for disrespect or hostility in our schools. After all, our children are all on the same journey, even if they're trying to chart different paths. And this can be profoundly important in building a safer future.

The spirit of America can triumph in this troubling moment, and I am convinced it will. But we must build the energy and will and passion of our country and the fundamental goodness of our people into a grassroots movement to turn away from violence and to give all our children the safe and wholesome childhoods they richly deserve.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:54 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Columbine High School gunmen Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold.